

QUE-rious Impositions: Reflections on the pedagogy at the core of a Regional Youth Theatre in Queensland, Australia

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Biography

Dr. Janet McDonald received her Ph.D. majoring in Theatre for Youth from Arizona State University in 1999, where she was also awarded the 1998/99 Distinguished Graduate Teacher Assistant Award. She has been a high school Drama teacher since 1987 and is currently lecturing in Drama and Theatre Studies at the University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba. Her current research interests include: regional youth theatres, and her ongoing research into masculinities and actor-training.

Abstract

QUE Theatre Inc. is an emerging regional youth theatre company in Toowoomba, situated 120 kms west of Brisbane, established in 2001. This paper is a personal reflection on the five years of QUEs existence, particularly addressing the generationalism towards youth theatre initiatives and how QUE has transcended its expectations as a theatre company to embrace a cultural pedagogic practice and purpose.

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The journey of this paper was begun in 2001 when my Head of Department asked me to create a youth theatre in Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia. As a lecturer in Drama and Theatre Studies at the Toowoomba campus of the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), I leapt at the chance to create a kind of ‘town and gown’ relationship for theatre in the region. This paper reflects upon QUE Theatre Inc’s potential as a site for cultural and critical pedagogy where predominant and precariously generationalist perceptions of regional youth create expectations of how a youth theatre should exist. I also wrestle with whether QUE Theatre Inc. was imposed upon Toowoomba, and if this ‘imposition’ might yet offer transformational potential for its youthful participants.

The University / Industry Partnership and Cultural Brokerage

Cultural pedagogic theory is strongly underpinned by the work of Bruner in his book *The Culture of Education* (1996) which champions the reciprocal relationships between people as key to cultural development and cultural literacies (Korat 2001:226). Trend suggests that cultural pedagogy involves analysing stories and encouraging this analytical spirit in others (1992:2-3), and this might entail the dismantling of old forms of art, art institutions, and art patronage and contest pedagogies that deny the very real ways that culture is produced and consumed (Doubleday 2004:6). It is with this impetus that the beginnings of QUE Theatre Inc. were assembled as a way to provide a very different theatrical model to that which exists in Toowoomba.

The state-government funded arts flagship, Queensland Theatre Company (QTC) regional interests changed after the company's regional tour of Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession* in 2000 was a financial failure (Gutteridge 2001:65). QTC has since developed "Regional Partnerships Programs" (begun in 2001), which prioritized an innovative way to retrieve and secure regional faith in their role as a state theatre company. The Department of Theatre at USQ and The Empire Theatre (ET) immediately took advantage of this program, and in March 2001 all three embarked on a regional partnership, called QUE Fest (an acronym using the first letter in the names of each of the partners). The partners initially envisioned a curatorial model for this project, i.e., to use their resources and expertise do much the same job as a gallery curator who 'assembles' theatre workshops, discussions, brings in experts, etc., in order to provide a custodial encouragement of new regional theatre performances. QUE Fest, a playbuilding program for local young people, was established to provide theatrical training in collaborative play creation, improvisation, scripting and rehearsal with 3rd Year theatre students from USQ, technical and management mentoring from the ET, while QTC provided theatre industry professionals to run workshops and mentor both USQ students and locals in making industry connections and networks. Thus, cultural pedagogy, with a keen focus upon mentoring quickly became the preferred method of theatrical practice for young people between the partners.

Since 2001, QUE Fest has been an annual event creating over 25 new theatre works, 12 films (documentaries of processes) with approximately 90 participants (aged between 11 and 17), many of whom have returned to the project over the five years. The QUE

initiative/partnership became incorporated as QUE Theatre Inc in March 2003 and their core business is still QUE Fest as well as a further five fee-paying pedagogic programs: QUE Able (intellectually disabled youth), QUE Fiish (indigenous youth), QUE Reach (rural youth), QUE Voce (helping teachers manage their voices) and QUE Tech (technical workshops). All QUE programs are facilitated by USQ Theatre staff and students so that they provide integral practical experiences and training of Theatre undergraduates. Although the current Memorandum of Agreement between USQ, QTC, and ET aims to support and advise QUE Theatre Inc., USQ remains the key stakeholder in the partnership that no doubt drives the pedagogic orientation of programs.

The relationship between the ‘adult’ partners and the youthful QUE Management Committee can be precarious as QUE wrestles with the nature of its emerging “voice”. The Committee continues to negotiate what it means to run a youth theatre company, and yet, their relative instability defines them: “...there are problems associated mainly with our lack of experience and expertise....everything we learn, we learn on the run....from my point of view, this is a defining characteristic of the company thus far”(Wilson 1).

Regional Youth and Generationalism

QUE Theatre Inc’s programs use a youth-mentoring-youth approach to playbuilding and theatrical skill attainment, yet QUE Fest is the only program with an outcome that presents the results of these collaborations for public attendance and reflection.

According to one respectable member of the Toowoomba community, it is an unprestigious festival that does not make money, therefore, youth theatrical activity as

‘risky’, ‘unstable’, ‘angst-ridden’, ‘self-indulgent’ and most damningly ‘unprofitable’. There is no doubt that the theatrical products by young people vary in their production values, aesthetic qualities, fictional content, and analysis of themselves. But the pedagogical intent of all QUE programs (including Fest) are not focused on an end product, rather, it is about the process of cultural awakening undertaken by the young people using theatre as their vehicle for expression, but this might not always get bums on seats. The implications about the aesthetics and quality control of the end products are of more concern to the ‘adult’ partners interested in a return on their generous in-kind investment in QUE Theatre Inc.

Historically, towns like Toowoomba offer cultural theatre products from three traditional and highly conservative avenues: the Repertory theatre, Philharmonic and Choral societies. The cultural products that are presented in the above arenas are almost always scripted, well published, well known crowd-pleaser plays and musicals where the production values may be glorified in order to hide inconsistent performances (McDonald 2002:14). To me, the emphasis on product transmits cultural norms rather than transforms them; there is no deliberate pedagogy applied nor modeled here, only a traditional belief that the director knows everything. Repertory and choral societies offer a social club-like atmosphere at best, where entertainment, self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment are the main goals of the participants. In my opinion, these institutions can be sites of theatrical ‘generationalism’ or ‘gatekeeping’; a particular attitudinal focus that concentrates on ‘what has been’ rather than ‘what can be’. Mark Davis’s book *Gangland: cultural elites and the new generationalism* suggests that “cultural

gatekeeping” is designed to apportion tastes and ideologies according to age, and to demonise young people (including divergent or ‘innovative’ approaches) as ‘outsiders’ (Davis 1999:16).

Concepts of ‘youth’ have traditionally been at odds with the adult-infused repertory theatre culture, and I believe this results in a kind of ‘youth-cultural cringe’ that promotes the perception of youth as an unstable category; the consistent exodus of young people from Toowoomba as is the case in many regional centres also feeds this perception.

Mary Ann Hunter’s paper entitled “Contemporary Australian Youth-Specific Performance and The Negotiation of Change” describes well the problems of generational discourses that are rife within our greater cultural, social and political spheres. “...at one end of the spectrum, youth as a discursive category has been equated with newness and innovation [while] a representation of young people as a problem generation has become more prevalent...” (2000:27). The anxiety she suggests is in regard to how institutions (including mainstream theatre industry) influence the shape and scope of youth culture by using these discourses that locate ‘youth’ in opposition to conservative beliefs of the mature, older ‘gatekeepers’ (2000:27).

Wyn and White suggest youthfulness is a state of ‘becoming’ (with the ‘arrival’ being adult) and therefore in flux, and unstable (1997:11). The idealism associated with youth is also often negated as fleeting and somehow suspicious by adult gatekeepers, and yet it is this potential for maverick innovation and ‘thinking outside of the box’ that Richard Florida defines as a necessary ingredient in building a creative community (2005:295)

“The Creative Class consists of people who add economic value through their creativity” (2005:68). Similarly, a recently published research entitled “*Innovation in rural Queensland: Why some towns thrive while others languish*,” by University of Queensland Business School and the Department of Primary Industries, reports that towns which demonstrate the ‘least innovation’ were linked to institutionalized generationalism; what Florida calls a “cultural hardening of the arteries” (2004: 303) where towns and their existing cultural practices are trapped by their past. The report strongly suggests that developing cultural capital is a hallmark of an innovative and sustainable community and that Queensland rural towns explore “all avenues to make their towns attractive to young people” (Plowman *et al*, 2003:4-5).

In terms of cultural brokerage or enabling for regional arts, John du Feu states in his paper “Listening for the Echo: Regional Theatre in the 21st” reminds us that “regional communities are not simply smaller versions of the capital cities,” and that any cultural-enabler must develop a dialogue with a local community, and place itself “in a position to receive directly the kind of insights and energies that can lead to creative theatre making and individual products” (2001:13). Eve Stafford, in her article entitled “Creating Waves”, suggests that the insistence upon growing a social capital which champions “conversations to exchange experiences, human scale storytelling and values-sharing” is the key to creating “good” regional theatre (2001:11).

Pedagogic Orientation: But is it theatre?

Prior to the 1990s, professional theatre for young people in Australia, both regional or metropolitan, was often product-orientated involving youth as audience where the play is developed along “conventions of ‘good’ [meaning ‘adult’] mainstream theatre” (Hunter 2000: 29). In Toowoomba, the ‘cultural cringe’ towards youth cultural initiatives may be a consequence of the town’s 90-minute driving proximity to Brisbane, the metropolitan capital city of Queensland. Many Drama teachers from local high schools, for example, prefer to take their drama classes to “the city” to see a performance as their chances of experiencing a “deficient” show there may be diminished.

Queensland research team, Judith McLean and Susan Richer suggest that an important provocation for discussion about theatre for young people is the reconceptualisation of the relationship “between artmakers, arts educators, and young people as partners in creating and learning cultures to assist arts practice” (2003:5). These “creating and learning cultures” necessarily change theatre from the dominant (and generationalist) mainstream view of the transmission of a story for an audience towards a transformative action that has collaboration and critical reflection imbedded it is making and presenting. For QUE, the young co-artists who facilitate the pedagogic programs become cultural enablers and potential agents of transformation for participants. But there is no set handbook for doing this, a lot of these programs serve the participants in a given time and place, the ‘youth-mentoring-youth’ pedagogy is that embraces flux and change; it is grounded in what Mary Anne Hunter calls a “natural” mentoring model where “the more

experienced person counseling the less experienced and introducing them to new opportunities, rather than just motivating, supporting and teaching them...” (2002:1).

QUE Theatre Inc, therefore, is less about youth theatre and more about pedagogy and cultural brokerage; the reliance on the USQ Department of Theatre have ensured this orientation. The partners acknowledge the importance of youthful mentoring in sustaining QUEs reputation as a cultural ‘broker’ in the region, yet QUE’s growth as a business has been less successful; its heavy pedagogic investment means that QUE does not yet have a strong artistic/aesthetic practice. This has precarious implications for youth theatre practice in general; QUE is currently a theatre without a building or artistic director, its fee-paying programs define its cultural territory as more pedagogic than artistic. A review of some of the websites of Australian regional youth theatres such as Karratha Youth Theatre (Western Australia), Corrugated Iron Youth Arts (Northern Territory), Riverland Youth Theatre (South Australia), Outback Youth Theatre (southwest New South Wales), LaLuna Youth Arts (North Queensland), and Goulburn Lieder Youth Theatre (Western New South Wales) all describe mentoring, industry / university partnerships, and guidance of key industry professionals that has supported their growth. What is also revealed is the frequency with which these youth theatres have continued to re-invent themselves; some successfully, some not so. Change and reinvention are common hallmarks of youth theatres that believe in youth participating in all aspects of its company. Making changes that amend mistakes and address organizational problems that plague fledgling youth theatres is part of the ongoing narrative of this field in Australia at this time.

Hunches and Impositions: Can they be transformational?

Clar Doyle, author of a fascinating book entitled *Raising the Curtain on Education: Drama as a Site for Critical Pedagogy* (1993), locates the theories of Paulo Freire and other emancipatory pedagogues as most visible inside drama education. His work articulates an aesthetic that Drama teachers have long understood and taken for granted; the nature of drama is about change and drama pedagogy is by its very nature transformational because it expects change. Human contexts are changeable, tentative and dynamic so that the transformation taking place inside both the fictional and real contexts used in drama education is a process of externalizing changes within (Doyle 1993: 1). The very choice of creating a company such as QUE Theatre Inc in a town like Toowoomba is a deliberate interrogation for change; to help young people have their own say through writing and performing their own material has great transformational potential. Genuine agency is about asking questions of established cultural ‘norms’; and I believe that transformation (no matter how public or personal) is the interface between cultural and critical pedagogies at work inside QUE.

The original impulse to create QUE Theatre Inc. came from an informed hunch (from talking with my own theatre students at USQ) about what young people might ‘need’ in Toowoomba. Acting upon this initial hunch, the three partners (USQ, QTC, and ET) essentially ‘imposed’ a theatre-making program (QUE Fest) on the Toowoomba community like a carrot on a stick; it was to be a pilot for investigating how we might go about creating a youth theatre company. Yet, since 2001, this ‘hunch’ about QUE Fest *has* created a need for young people interested in exploring different dramatic

possibilities in their own backyard. I very much connect these hunches with the desire for change and taking a risk, the hunches have a youthful quality about them that reflects the young energy of QUE's Management Committee. Generationalsists might target these hunches as unsophisticated, even 'cheap' in that formal market research was not undertaken to prove the need, and yet they were informed hunches. Yet, all of the programs currently on offer have their genesis in an enquiry from the public or a perceived 'hole' in Toowoomba's cultural makeup that bubbled-up from my USQ students' connections with theatre and youth-arts practitioners in the town (many of whom are USQ arts graduates).

This kind of community connection and interpretation of local trends has been a vital attribute in the young Management Committee members of QUE. One member stated, "I believe we have the potential to provide the market with products they didn't even know they wanted, but when they see them, they'll want more" (Wilson 2). These hunches are characteristic of the development of a Creative Class; "members engage in work whose function is to 'create meaningful new forms' They are required to regularly think on their own. They apply or combine standard approaches in unique ways to fit the situation..." (Florida 2004: 68-69). Although QUE participants do not immediately recognise their involvement in a transformational process that actively rejects Toowoomba's over abundant transmission of musicals, they keep returning.

So, was there a genuine need for innovative youth theatre initiatives in Toowoomba or did the imposition create a need? Both: sometimes a community underestimates its

ability to make theatre a collaborative storytelling tool, instead, placing its cultural capital in the hands of adult ‘artists’ and ‘established’ arts providers. For this reason I believe the hunches had transformational potential in that the desire for change and disruption to the cultural ‘norms’ of the town was motivated by USQ Department of Theatre’s recognition of a youthful absence in theatre-making experiences. bell hooks tells us that the stimulation of excitement via a desire for possibility is a key to promoting serious intellectual or academic engagement; “...our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another ...in recognizing one another’s presence” (1994: 7-8). This brings me back to the emphasis on pedagogy that QUE Theatre Inc. currently maintains; the critical and cultural pedagogies encourage transformational urges to ‘impose hunches’ and these have provided significant enlightenment on whether or not a youth theatre company can to be defined (or constrained) in terms of its process, not just its performance outcomes.

McLean and Richer warn in their article “Theatre for Young People in Australia” that young people’s exposure to youth-specific programs or products does not necessarily equate with an understanding of art making and aesthetic literacy. They argue that it is not simply osmosis that creates effective or meaningful youth theatre experiences, but the nurturing and sustenance of a *desire* in young people to articulate and be critical of what they want and how they want it, otherwise they cannot become advocates for a utilitarian theatre culture in their town, participants and “[a]udiences do not return to theatre when they have not connected with the work” (2003:4). Therefore, I believe that where there is a desire to repeat participatory experiences in QUE programs, there is a strong sense of

community being built; this must be a building block towards efficacy and transformation.

Measuring tangible outcomes in youth arts practice is difficult and there has been some resistance to the quantifying of an arts initiative which claims altruistically that ‘youth arts can make a difference’ (McEvoy 2003:16). What the data collected by QUE Theatre Inc. (in the form of box-office takings, bookings for workshops, detailed evaluation forms, and filmed interviews) reveals is that there has been a small but steadily growing number of returning youth to QUE programs, particularly those which have a long and intense rehearsal period such as QUE Fest. I have witnessed this emerging group of young people grow through the awkwardness of their teenage years using QUE programs to experiment with who they are and empower their theatre-making skills. Each year they co-opt more friends into the process and they are beginning to create a community we loosely term the ‘QUE mob’. The mentoring and cultural pedagogy that is heavily employed by QUE via its relationship with USQ (especially) equates with a longitudinal development of community and belonging, which is a particular type of cultural and critical ‘knowing’.

In conclusion, cultural transformations take years to establish because it is about disrupting generationally entrenched expectations of theatrical product (eisteddfods, choral societies, etc.), especially towards the youth ‘cultural cringe’ experienced in a regional town. In spite of the initial impulse to impose QUE on the Darling Downs, at this five-year junction, I see an organic transformational act beginning to take place in the

form of the building of a youthful creative class. QUE Theatre Inc. is constantly in flux, negotiating its position in the region as an agent for change and experimentation with youth theatre. I believe the perceived generationalistic tensions between the partners and also the youthful Management Committee is actually a necessary, most productive and motivational phenomena in the sustaining of cultural and critical pedagogy in this regional town. Change, the desire to change, and the forethought and planning needed to embrace change – regardless of whether they are imposed or organically transformed – are what makes QUE Theatre Inc. a necessary part of the evolving the cultural landscape of a regional community.

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